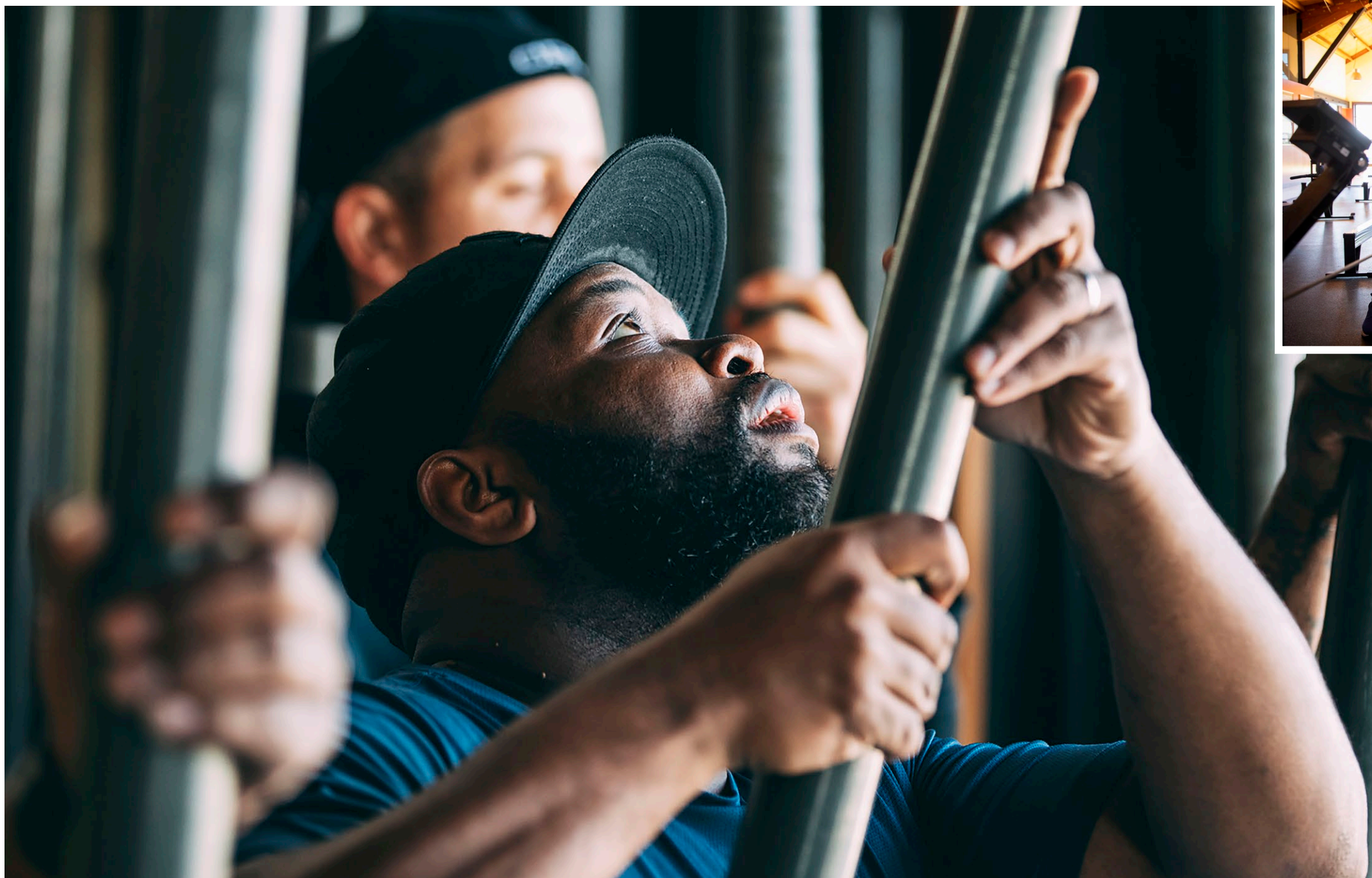
A photograph of a group of men on a boat, likely rowers. In the foreground, a man with a beard and a black beanie, wearing a blue hoodie, looks off to the side. Behind him, other men are visible, some holding oars. The background shows a body of water and a city skyline under a bright, hazy sky.

**ARSHAY COOPER**, 38, GREW UP ON THE TOUGH WEST SIDE OF CHICAGO, BUT HIS LIFE WAS CHANGED AGED 15 WHEN HE JOINED HIS HIGH SCHOOL ROWING TEAM. HERE, HE TELLS ROW360 WHY HIS CREW REUNITED 20 YEARS ON FOR THE DOCUMENTARY FILM A MOST BEAUTIFUL THING.

**“BEING ON THE WATER WAS SPELLBINDING”**





The first time Arshay Cooper set foot in a rowing boat, he was terrified, and so were his crewmates. All of them came from the West Side of Chicago, an area notorious for gang violence and fractured families torn apart by poverty and unemployment.

"We'd all grown up in this neighbourhood," Arshay, 38, tells *Row360*. "These guys were fearless. You don't see people who are scared on the West Side because everyone is so tough and if you're not, you have to fake it to survive. And then you push them out on the water and you see them scared for the first time. It was crazy."

Arshay, who was 15, originally joined up with the rowing team on the promise of free pizza, little

knowing that the sport he was about to take up would transform his entire life. Now, a new film, *A Most Beautiful Thing*, directed by former US Olympic rower Mary Mazzio, tells the story of how Arshay and his fellow rowers, the first all-black high school crew in the States, found solace and serenity on the water as teenagers. It follows them as they reunite 20 years later to race in front of their home crowd in the Chicago Sprints event in Lincoln Park lagoon.

It could have all been very different. When Arshay first saw the gleaming white boat that had been rigged up in the school lunchroom, he was overwhelmed. "I saw this beautiful boat, and when

I looked at the TV they were showing the Olympic Games and I didn't see anyone who looked like me, I thought, 'This isn't for me.'"

The programme was founded by a 32-year-old trader called Ken Alpart, a former rower, and his organisation, Urban Options. He came to Arshay's school, Manley High, to recruit students with the help of an employee and former cox, Mike O'Gorman and a coaching team. They managed to capture Arshay's imagination when he was lured back by the thought of pizza the following day.

"When I heard them talk for the first time about the great things about rowing, it caught my attention. I had no friends, I wasn't part of no team, I

**"There were no sirens, no street noise, no arguments. The sound of the blades represented peace."**

had no one to count on. That's when I thought I could possibly try it," says Arshay.

While their first outing had been a disaster, the second time Arshay went out on the water, he was hooked. "What I loved about it was because of the fear we knew we had to get back to the dock and to get there, we had to count on each other and pull for each other. Seeing the downtown view and the houses and being able to move on the water - it was beautiful."

"The sound of the blades represented peace. There were no sirens, no street noise, no arguments, just the coach inspiring and motivating us to push forward. It was spellbinding - there we were, different guys from different gangs who wouldn't normally speak to each other in the school, pulling for each other."

Arshay and his crewmates, including Alvin Ross, Preston Granberry and Malcolm Hawkins, decided to make the commitment to training five times a week. But it wasn't easy. Home life was difficult - Arshay's mother was a drug addict and, as Mary's film reveals, all their families were suffering from the long-term effects of generational trauma in different ways. Plus, there was no respect for the sport in an area where, thanks to Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls, basketball is a religion.

"It was not considered a real sport. Coaches would tell me if I was going to put time into a sport then it should be something where I could earn money in a professional league," Arshay says. "But I grew up in a violent neighbourhood, and I found sports like football violent. Rowing didn't trigger any trauma for me. Also, it exhausted me so much, I didn't want to do anything except go home! Everything, like chilling or hanging out playing video games, becomes secondary once you become a rower." →

**Above and main**  
Manley Team with oars on location in Chicago.

**Top right** Arshay Cooper and teammates training in Oakland, California.

**Previous page**  
On location with Mike Teti in Oakland.



After five months, the Manley High crew were ready to race at the Chicago Sprints. But although they knew the sport they'd entered into was predominantly white, turning up on the day was a shock. "We were the only black kids there. The crews were white, the parents were white, the volunteers were white. People were staring, wondering, 'Who are these guys?' And the fear was hard. You have goosebumps and your arms and knees feel weak."

Their first race ended disastrously. The inexperienced cox, Ray 'Pookie G' Hawkins, came a cropper in the narrow stretch of water and the eight hit a brick wall. "Everyone was staring. It was so embarrassing. I said to myself, 'Maybe it's not for me,'" says Arshay.

But determined to salvage something from the day, he took part in an erg competition. "I did 1000m against one of the kids in the other boat. I did it, I crushed him and it gave me a little bit of hope."

Arshay and his crew continued with the sport for three seasons, gradually coming together as a crew. But the programme wasn't only about moving the boat, it was also, Arshay says, "about teaching us to take the lessons of rowing and use them for the rest of our lives."

After leaving school, Arshay became a chef but kept in touch with his crew and the sport. At the wake of their former coach Mike O'Gorman in 2018, he hatched a plan to reunite the team. Mary, who had already linked up with Arshay after reading his book, originally titled *Suga Water*, recalls, "He called me shortly thereafter. 'We've decided to race again,' he said. 'At the Chicago Sprints this summer. I've talked to the guys and we all want to do this, for different reasons. Pookie wants to prove he can steer without crashing into anything. Malcolm wants to race for his sons and Alvin wants to race to celebrate the fact we survived the West Side, that we're still alive.'" →



**"You don't see people who are scared on the West Side because everyone is so tough and if you're not, you have to fake it to survive. And then you push them out on the water and you see them scared for the first time."**





**Main** Alvin Ross grimaces on the ergometer in Oakland.

**Right** The Manley Crew on the water in 1998.

For Arshay it was a dream come true to have an Olympic rower make the documentary and “kick their butt” at the same time, and Mary says of the inspirational captain, “There was some extraordinary talent in the original Manley High eight. When they hung up their oars, three continued in gangs and one was under house arrest when we were filming. But they are all out of the gang and they are all entrepreneurs. Arshay has been the glue supporting his teammates and helps everyone make better decisions.”

The former crewmates were living in separate cities, so training was hard. But they met up once a month and got back in shape on the erg. Again,

their first outing together was not a success, and Arshay picked up the phone to legendary Olympian and the coach of the US men’s rowing team, Mike Teti. “It did not feel good at first,” Arshay tells us. “My body was aching, and the boat was rocking. But Mike helped us get the boat moving again and that feeling came back. We got better every day, and everyone lost a ton of weight.”

Arshay wasn’t content with only reuniting the old team. He decided to get the Chicago police force involved, too, and the film reveals how, despite an awkward first meeting, the rowers form a crew with four officers from

the CPD. “The point was that they should know there are young black men who are defying the odds. I wanted to introduce them to our world, to show them we go to work every day, we love each other, and we work hard to give our kids an opportunity,” Arshay says.

What happens on the day of the Chicago Sprints is revealed in the film. But for Arshay, the best part was being able to show his family and friends what this sport was all about. “I saw my mum, and my homeboys who said it wasn’t a real sport, and they were like, ‘Wow!’. To have people cheering and not staring at you was the best feeling.”

**“I saw my mum, and my homeboys who said it wasn’t a real sport, and they were like, ‘Wow!’”**

Delayed due to the pandemic, the film was released on 31 July in the States, and the timing could not be more fitting what with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. “It comes at a point when people are no longer in denial about racism and injustice in the US,” says Arshay. “The film is important because it shows why our lives matter, and how gifted we are.”

As for Arshay himself, he’ll continue on a mission to spread his passion about rowing and increase diversity in the sport. His dream is to make it more accessible to children from communities like his on the West Side.

“Growing up, me and my buddies could walk up to the basketball court and the soccer field and just work on our craft. That’s why those sports are so diverse. But with rowing, you show up at the boathouse and they say, ‘Where’s your \$3000 for the season?’ I’m working to change that because a sport should reflect the diversity in a country and in a community. Everyone should have access to this amazing sport.” **ROW360**

For more information, see [www.amostbeautifulthing.com](http://www.amostbeautifulthing.com)